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ABSTRACT

This digest reviews various longitudinal studies that examined the long-term effects of programs that served young children living in poverty and at risk of school failure. Concerning program effects on school performance, all studies that collected data on children's intellectual performance found that their program groups had better intellectual performance than their no-program groups during the program and for a year or two thereafter. Results of various studies indicated that, compared to the no-program group, program group members were less likely to be placed in special education classes and to be retained in grade, and had higher high school graduation rates. Concerning the programs' effects on community behavior, one study found that, compared to the no-program group, program group members: (1) had fewer criminal arrests; (2) spent less time on probation; (3) reported higher monthly earnings; (4) were more likely to own a home and a second car; and (5) received less welfare assistance or other social services as adults. One study that analyzed the costs and benefits of a preschool program found significant returns to taxpayers from savings in later schooling costs, higher taxes paid by program participants because of their later higher earnings, savings in welfare assistance, and savings to the criminal justice system and to potential victims of crimes. These studies suggest that high-quality programs for young children produce long-term benefits because they empower young children to carry out their own learning activities; parents to work with teachers in supporting children's development; and teachers to engage in practices that support children and parents. (BC)

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Lasting Benefits of Preschool Programs

Lawrence J. Schweinhart

More than other educational innovations, high-quality programs for young children living in poverty have demonstrated the promise of lasting benefits and return on investment. Various longitudinal studies have documented such benefits. Some of these studies have been *intensive*, i.e., they used a strict experimental design but studied fewer than 500 study participants at a single site. Others have been *extensive*, i.e., they used a less strict design but studied more than 500 study participants at multiple sites or over several years. Generally speaking, the results of intensive studies are clearly valid for the subject group studied but are harder to generalize to a larger population. The reverse is true for extensive studies. Both types of studies are important to well-informed public policy development.

The programs examined in the longitudinal studies reported in this digest served young children living in poverty who were at special risk of school failure. Children entered the programs at some time before age five and remained in them for at least one school year. The studies examined a variety of high-quality early childhood programs that included either classes for children or home visits to parents and children or both. Some of the studies lasted only a few years, while others followed program participants into adulthood.

Effects on School Performance

All of the studies that collected data on early childhood *intellectual performance* found that their program groups had significantly better intellectual performance than their no-program groups during the program and for a year or two thereafter. A comprehensive meta-analysis identified 50 Head Start studies that found evidence of immediate improvements in children's intellectual and socioemotional performance and health that lasted several years (McKey et al., 1985).

Some educators and others believe that, while preschool programs for children in poverty have positive effects, these effects *fade away* over time. However, clear evidence of the gradual disappearance of effects has been found only for gains in children's scores on tests of their intellectual performance, and not for other positive effects of programs.

Several studies, including those by Gray et al. (1982), Irvine (1982), Levenstein et al. as reported in the Consortium for Longitudinal Studies (CLS) (1983, p.237-263), and Schweinhart et al. (1993), found that significantly fewer program participants than nonparticipants in a matched control group were *ever placed in special education classes*. In three studies by Gotts (1989), Irvine (1982), and Palmer as reported in the CLS (1983, p.201-236), significantly fewer program participants than nonparticipants were *ever retained in grade*.

In several studies (Fuerst & Fuerst, 1993; Gotts, 1989; Schweinhart et al., 1993), the program group had a significantly higher *high school graduation rate* than the no-program group. When these findings were examined by gender, it was found that girls who had participated in the program had significantly higher graduation rates than girls who had not participated, but that a similar difference between participants and nonparticipants was not evident for boys. Nevertheless, in the one study with relevant data for adults (Schweinhart et al., 1993), men who had been program participants had significantly higher monthly earnings, higher rates of home ownership, and fewer lifetime arrests than men who had not participated in the program.

Effects on Community Behavior

One intensive study, the High/Scope study as reported by Schweinhart et al. (1993), found evidence that program participation had positive effects on adult crime, earnings, wealth, welfare dependence, and commitment to marriage. For example, program group members averaged significantly fewer *criminal arrests* than the no-program group—2.3 versus 4.6 arrests. Only 12% of men who had participated in the program had been arrested five or more times, compared to 49% of men who had not participated in the program. Only 7% of the program group had ever been arrested for drug dealing, significantly fewer than the 25% of the no-program group. In the High/Scope study and one other (Lally et al., 1988), program-group members spent significantly less time on probation than did no-program group members.

The High/Scope study found that 29% of those who had participated in the program reported *monthly earnings at age 27* of $2,000 or more, significantly more than the 7% of nonparticipants who reported such earnings. For men, the difference was due to better paying jobs: 42% of participants as compared to only 6% of nonparticipants reported such monthly earnings. For women, the difference was in employment rates: 80% of participants but only 55% of nonparticipants were employed at the time of the age-27 interview. Significantly more of the program group than the no-program group *owned their own homes* (36% versus 13%) and *owned second cars* (30% versus 13%). Significantly fewer program group members than no-program group members *received welfare assistance or other social services* as adults (59% versus 80%). The study found that 40% of

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women who had participated in the program, but only 8% of those who had not, were *married at age 27;* while 57% of the births to program females were *out-of-wedlock,* 83% of the births to no-program females were out-of-wedlock.

Return on Investment

The 1993 Schweinhart et al. study also involved a systematic analysis of the costs and benefits of the preschool program and its effects, expressed in constant 1992 dollars discounted annually at 3%. The program returned to taxpayers $88,433 per participant from the following sources:

- savings in schooling, due primarily to reduced need for special education services, and despite increased college costs for preschool-program participants;
- higher taxes paid by preschool-program participants because they had higher earnings;
- savings in welfare assistance; and
- savings to the criminal justice system and to potential victims of crimes.

With most participants attending the program for two school years, the average cost of the program was $12,356 per participant. Thus, the program provided taxpayers a *return on investment* of $7.16 on the dollar, better than most other public and private investments. The program cost $7,252 per child per year, primarily because it provided one teacher for every five children. It probably would have had the same effects if it had had one teacher for every eight children and would then have cost $5,000 per child per year. Spending less than that, however, would have jeopardized the program's effectiveness and return on investment.

Only High-Quality Programs Have Lasting Effects

These studies suggest that high-quality programs for young children produce significant long-term benefits because they empower young children, parents, and teachers.

High-quality programs *empower young children* by encouraging them to initiate their own learning activities. The idea that young children initiate their own learning activities rather than act as mere passive recipients of information from others is central to developmentally appropriate practice for young children. Such active learning encourages children to solve their everyday intellectual, social, and physical problems and to assume a measure of control over their environment.

Such programs *empower parents* by involving them as partners with teachers in supporting their children's development. Most of the preschool programs found to have long-term benefits included weekly home visits or emphasized parent involvement in other ways. The programs strengthened parents' ability to view their children as able, active learners and to support their children's development of a sense of control and of intellectual, social, and physical abilities.

Such programs *empower teachers* by providing them with inservice curriculum training and supportive curriculum supervision, which help them engage in practices that support children and parents. Such training is most successful in promoting quality when agencies have supportive administrations and trained curriculum specialists on staff who provide teachers with hands-on workshops, observation and feedback, and follow-up sessions (Epstein, 1993).

Too often, our response to the intractable problems of poverty, crime, drug abuse, unemployment, and welfare dependence is frustration and even despair. Whatever we do, it seems these problems will not go away. Nor will high-quality pre-school programs make them go away entirely. But the evidence suggests that providing such programs will significantly reduce the magnitude of these problems; and that is reason enough to provide them.

For More Information

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